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ABSTRACT

The present study tested the "just world" hypothesis that a socially respectable person is more at fault in a crime in which he or she is the victim. It was assumed that the attitudinal similarity of a hypothetical juror to the victim and the defendant would make both the victim and the defendant more respectable. Employing a 2 (victim vs. defendant description) X 2 (similarity vs. dissimilarity of attitudinal information) X 2 (male vs. female respondent) design, it was found that in a rape case males attribute more guilt to a defendant who is similar to themselves, as opposed to one dissimilar; females attribute more guilt to a victim when the defendant is described as similar as opposed to dissimilar to themselves. Thus male responses confirmed the "just world" notion while female responses were in direct contradiction. (Author)

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INFLUENCE OF ATTITUDINAL SIMILARITY TO A DEFENDANT AND VICTIM ON GUILT ATTRIBUTION BY SIMULATED JURORS

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The present study tested the "just world" hypothesis that a socially respectable person is more at fault in a crime in which he or she is the victim. It was assumed that the attitudinal similarity of a hypothetical juror to the victim and the defendant would make both the victim and the defendant more respectable. Employing a 2 (victim vs. defendant description) X 2 (similarity vs. dissimilarity of attitudinal information) X 2 (male vs. female respondent) design, it was found that in a rape case males attribute more guilt to a defendant who is similar to themselves, as opposed to one dissimilar; while females attribute more guilt to a victim when the defendant is described as similar as opposed to dissimilar to themselves. Thus male responses confirmed the "just world" notion while female responses were in direct contradiction.

Jones and Aronson (1973) recently reported a study in which Ss were asked to read a description of a hypothetical rape involving either a divorced woman (low respectability) or a married or virgin woman (high respectability), and to indicate on a scale the extent to which they perceived the victim to be at fault. It was found that the married and virgin victims were judged to be more personally responsible for the crime than the divorced victim. The authors related these results to Lerner's "just world" notion (Lerner, 1965; Lerner & Simmons, 1966) which maintains that people prefer to view the world as a fair and equitable place in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished. This is also compatible with consistency theory as exemplified by Heider's balance model (1958) which postulates a tendency for man to perceive cognitive elements of like sign as belonging together. Thus one expects unfortunate or undesirable events to plague negatively valued individuals since their collective life-styles warrant such outcomes. The rape of a low-status victim, therefore, is consistent with the "just world" view and confirms one's expectations that bad things happen to undesirable people. The rape of a high-status victim, however, is quite unsettling and poses a threat to one's concept of an orderly and predictable environment. One method of resolving this inconsistency is to attribute the misfortunes of positively valued individuals to the idiosyncratic shortcomings or faults of the victims. By holding the high status victim personally responsible for the crime, one can retain a "just world" philosophy and conclude that positively valued individuals are safe from misfortune unless they openly

court disaster. Thus, while the rape of a low status victim can be casually dismissed as a natural consequence of her social position, the rape of a high-status victim requires a more personalized explanation. The simplest resolution is to conclude that since respectable women are normally immunized against rape via their virtuous character, the victim, in this specific instance, either through carelessness or design, actually invited the assault, and is therefore personally responsible for her misfortune.

The present experiment involved an investigation of the effects of perceived similarity on the attribution of responsibility to the participants in a rape sequence. In a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design male and female Ss read a description of a rape in which either the victim or defendant was depicted as being attitudinally similar or dissimilar to themselves. Following this, the Ss were asked to indicate the degree to which the defendant and victim were responsible for the crime and to recommend a sentence for the defendant. Based on Lerner's "just world" hypothesis and the earlier findings of Jones and Aronson (1973) it was predicted that the greater the perceived similarity between the S and the rape participant, the greater the need to personalize the crime by attributing individual responsibility to the participant. Assuming that attitudinal similarity will mean increased respectability to the Ss, all Ss should attribute more responsibility to a victim the more similar she is to the respondent. The rapist should be perceived by all Ss as less guilty if his victim is similar rather than dissimilar to the respondent. Extending the "just world" hypothesis to the defendant's personality, it was predicted that defendants

described as similar to the S would be percieved as more responsible and their victims less responsible than the case in which the defendant is described as dissimilar to the S.

Method

Subjects: The Ss were 159 introductory and social psychology students at Northern Kentucky State College. Ninety of the Ss were male; 69 female.

Procedure: With the information that the E was collecting normative data on attitudes, the Ss were asked to express their attitude on seven issues taken from the Byrne Survey of Attitudes (1971). In another survey conducted several days later (the time interval varied from 3 days to 3 weeks depending on the class), Ss were asked to read the description of a rape case. The description, with slight modifications, was a replica of the one used by Jones and Aronson (1973), and was identical for all conditions. It read as follows:

> After a night class at the University, Judy Wyatt walked across campus toward her car which was parked two blocks off the Mall. The defendant, Charles Engles, a classmate, was walking across the Mall in the same direction as the victim and began to follow her. Less than a block from the victim's car, the defendant accosted the victim and a struggle resulted in which the defendant allegedly stripped and sexually assaulted the victim. A passerby heard the victim's screams and phoned the police who arrived to apprehend the defendant within a few minutes after he had completed his alleged assault.

Following the description of the case, a "psychological profile" of either the defendant or the victim was presented to the Ss. This "profile" contained three sources of information. MMPI and Edwards Personal Preference Schedules were included as fillers and were identical for all Ss whether the defendant or victim was described. No interpretive information was provided regarding these profiles. In addition, half of the Ss received a description of the victim's "responses" to the Byrne Scale which indicated that the victim was either exactly like or exactly opposite the S in his attitudes toward the seven items. The remaining Ss received a description of the defendant's responses to the Byrne Scale which were either an exact replica or a mirror image of their own.

Subjects were then asked to rate the guilt of the defendant and the victim in the rape case on an 11-point scale ranging from "Completely responsible" to "Not at all responsible." In addition, the Ss were asked to assign a prison term to the defendant on a scale ranging from "None" to "Over 40 years" in three year increments.

After assigning responsibility to victim and defendant and a prison term to the defendant, all Ss received an explanation of the study including information on the independent and dependent variables in the study.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed by means of a 2 (defendant versus victim description--D) X 2 (similar versus dissimilar--S) X 2 (male versus female respondent--R) unweighted means analysis of variance for each of the dependent variables--defendant's term, defendant's guilt, and victim's guilt. Cell means were unequal, but the loss of Ss from one survey to the next appeared random and was evenly

distributed across conditions; consequently, the unweighted means analysis was utilized (Winer, 1971, p. 445).

Results

Recommended Prison Term: The results of the analyses of variance on all three dependent variables are presnted in Table 1. Though

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Insert Table 1 about here

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there were significant differences in attribution of guilt to the defendant and the victim, the analysis of variance of the prison terms assigned to the defendant revealed no differences across conditions. Terms assigned to the defendant were highly variable as evidenced by the large within cell variance relative to the other two analyses. Inspection of the Ss' responses indicated that for this dependent variable Ss varied along the entire scale in all cells.

Defendant's Guilt: The analysis of variance on the attribution of guilt to the defendant revealed three significant interactions: D X R, S X R, and D X S X R. Table 2 contains the cell means for this analysis and Figure 1 is an illustration of the three way interaction.

Insert Table 2 and Figure 1 about here

Analysis of the simple main effects relevant to the hypotheses revealed that defendants described as similar to the respondent were seen as significantly more guilty when the respondent was male, t (46) = 3.7685, $p < .01$. The effect of describing the

defendant as similar to the respondent was reversed for female respondents though the difference was not significant (see Table 2). Though not predicted by the hypotheses, male Ss also attributed significantly less guilt to the defendant when the defendant was described as dissimilar to themselves than when the victim was described as dissimilar to themselves, t (45) = 2.8973, $p < .01$; and females attributed significantly more guilt to defendants described as dissimilar to themselves than did males confronted with a dissimilar defendant, t (36) = 3.7415, $p < .01$.

Victim's Guilt: The analysis of variance for victim's guilt showed a significant main effect for the respondent's sex (males attributed more guilt to the victim) and a significant D X S X R interaction (see Table 1 and Figure 2). Table 3 is a presentation of the cell means for this analysis. Contrary to the hypotheses, tests for

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Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

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simple effects revealed that female respondents attributed significantly more guilt to the victim when the defendant was described as similar than when he was described as dissimilar, t (31) = 2.2602, $p < .05$. Males did attribute less guilt to the victim when the defendant was described as similar to the respondent but not significantly so. In addition, female respondents attributed significantly more guilt to a victim when she was dissimilar to the respondent than when the defendant was described as dissimilar, t (32) = 2.4125, $p < .05$. Finally, male Ss were significantly more severe

in their judgments of victim's guilt than females when the defendant was described as holding views dissimilar to the respondent, t (36) = 3.3205, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The nonsignificance of the effects in the analyses of variance on the defendant's prison term coupled with significant differences on the other two dependent variables raises several questions. Subjects in all conditions expressed concern in a "remarks" section on the questionnaire on having to make a decision as to a prison term with so little evidence or the effect of a prison term on the rehabilitation of the prisoner. As noted above, lack of significant effects on this dependent variable was due to large within cell variance probably caused by the Ss' confusion and difference of opinion as to appropriate punishement.

Results with respect to the other two dependent variables indicated that attribution of guilt to the defendant and victim produced less disagreement among the Ss within a cell. Subjects were reliably affected by the independent variables when attributing guilt, but were considering other factors when assigning sentences. It might be suggested that Ss were willing to make a decision as to the guilt of the parties involved, but not so willing or so certain with respect to appropriate treatment of prsioners. Previous studies have found significant results with respect to a defendant's term, but they have generally not asked Ss to ascribe guilt to the defendant (Jones & Aronson, 1973; Landy & Aronson, 1969). These may be two independent dimensions considered by a juror; in fact, our legal system treats them as such.

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Results of the ANOVA on the defendant's and victim's guilt lend mixed support to the "just world" hypothesis. Male Ss attributed more guilt to similar defendants (whom we assume are more respectable) but women do not. In fact, the women attributed less guilt to similar defendants than to dissimilar defendants, though this difference was not significant. Also unsupportive of the hypothesis was the fact that the victim's description had no effect on the attribution of guilt to the defendant. Male Ss did attribute less guilt (nonsignificant at the .05 level) to the victim when the defendant was described as similar as opposed to dissimilar to the S. For female Ss however, there were two instances in which the results were opposite those predicted. Females attributed more guilt to the victim when the defendant was described as similar rather than dissimilar to the respondent. Also victims described as similar to the respondent were perceived as less guilty than those described as dissimilar (nonsignificant difference, $p > .05$).

One explanation may be that Ss identify with the participants in the rape on the basis of sex; males with males and females with females. Since all Ss apparently ignored the victim's personality, it appears as though Ss view rape as a male-controlled crime; i. e., males either forcibly attack a female or react to their seductive approaches; or the present case of rape was so unambiguously described that the victim can't be blamed. While ignoring the personal characteristics of the female, males are sensitive to the similarity-dissimilarity of the defendant. Males reduced inconsistency by attri-

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buting more guilt to the defendant and less to the victim when the defendant was similar to the S. As the "just world" notion states, highly respectable persons are more personally responsible for crimes. Female Ss apparently found rape by a dissimilar person as more reprehensible. Empathizing with the female victim, females attributed more guilt to a dissimilar defendant and less to a victim raped by a dissimilar defendant.

The differences in the responses of female Ss in the present study and that of the Jones and Aronson (1973) may also be due to the status manipulation. The status manipulation in the present study (attitudinal similarity-dissimilarity) and the manipulation in the Jones and Aronson study (marital status) are quite different. Marital status is a fact; attitudinal similarity is a powerful affective force for interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971) and may evoke more personal involvement with the predicament of the parties in a rape case. Since the description of the case and treatment of Ss was very similar in the studies, it would seem that a study which varied both marital status and attitudinal similarity may resolve some of the inconsistencies.

In summation, male responses confirm the "just world" hypothesis when the males are considering defendant's guilt. The victim's characteristics played no role in Ss' attribution of guilt to the defendant or the victim. Female responses are in direct contradiction to the 'just world' notion. This may be due to a greater tendency of female Ss to empathize with a rape victim or to a combination of the unambiguity of the rape description and the status manipulation in the present study. In either case, the results question the generalizability of the "just world" notion.

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Footnotes

[1] Requests for reprints should be made to Neal Schmitt, Department of Psychology, Olds Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48823.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance on Defendant's Term, Attribution of Guilt to the Defendant, and Attribution of Guilt to the Victim

		Defendant's Term		Defendant's Guilt		Victim's Guilt	
Source[a]	df	MS	F	MS	F	MS	F
D	1	40.802	<1	.248	<1	.367	<1
S	1	1.744	<1	6.029	1.37	.087	<1
R	1	37.306	<1	1.117	<1	33.606	4.412[b]
DS	1	33.246	<1	2.514	<1	9.758	1.281
DR	1	11.374	<1	24.734	5.620[b]	8.816	1.157
SR	1	32.889	<1	26.947	6.124[b]	11.584	1.521
DSR	1	4.274	<1	24.425	5.551[b]	45.289	5.946[b]
Error	151	54.941		4.400		7.617	

[a] D = Defendant versus Victim description, S = similar versus dissimilar attitudinal information, R = male versus female respondent.

[b] $p < .05$.

Table 2

Cell Means for Defendant's Guilt

	Male		Female	
	Similar	Dissimilar	Similar	Dissimilar
Defendant	9.88	7.60	9.22	10.20
Victim	9.55	9.37	8.88	8.78

Table 3

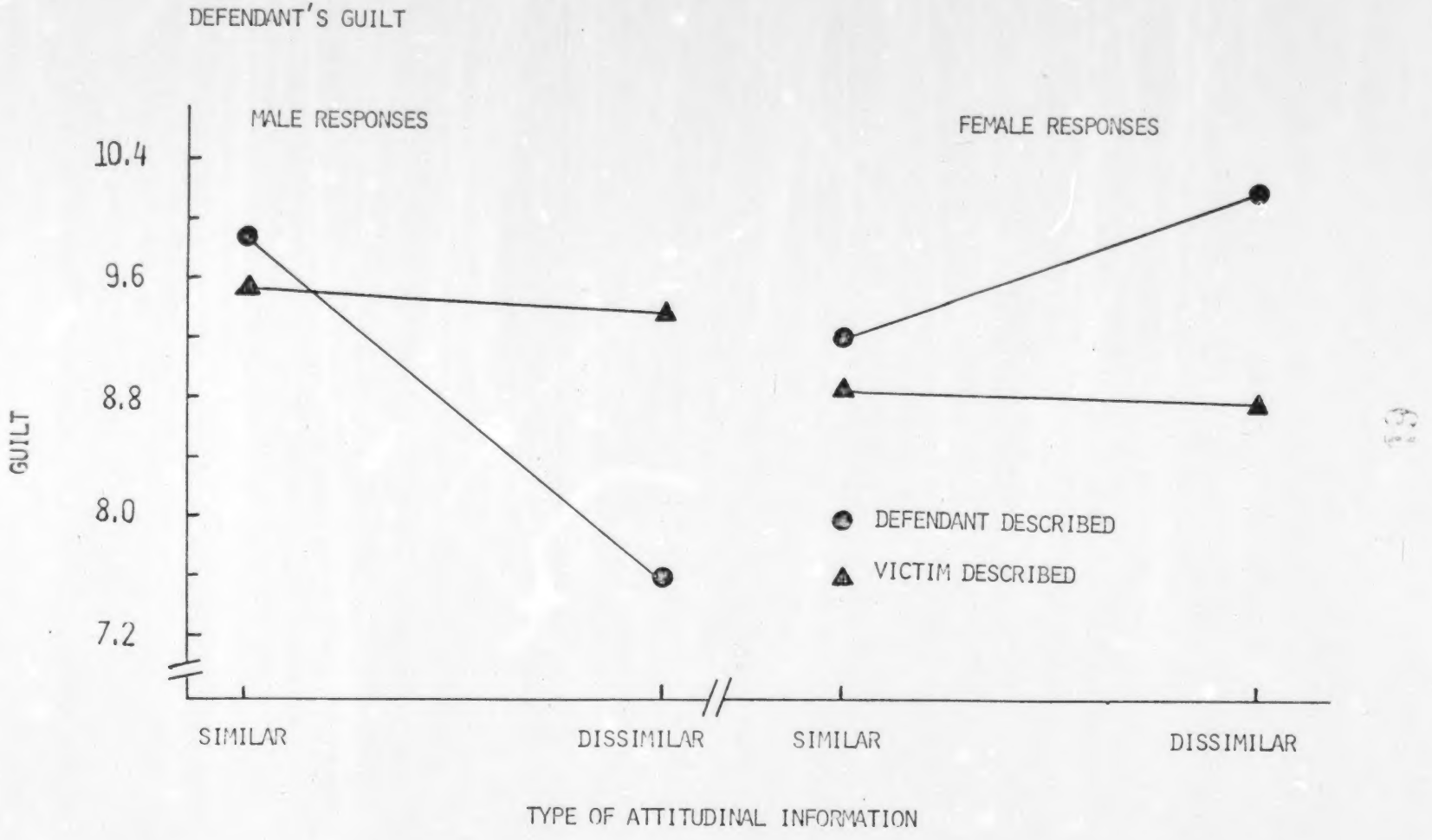
Cell Means for Victim's Guilt

	Male		Female	
	Similar	Dissimilar	Similar	Dissimilar
Defendant	3.96	5.04	4.18	2.00
Victim	4.16	4.08	3.17	4.16

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Attribution of guilt to the defendant as a function of the party described, the type of attitudinal information, and the sex of the respondent.

Figure 2. Attribution of guilt to the victim as a function of the party described, the type of attitudinal information, and the sex of the respondent.


DEFENDANT'S GUILT
MALE RESPONSES
FEMALE RESPONSES
10.4
9.6
8.8
8.0
7.2
GUILT
DEFENDANT DESCRIBED
VICTIM DESCRIBED
SIMILAR
DISSIMILAR
SIMILAR
DISSIMILAR
TYPE OF ATTITUDINAL INFORMATION

VICTIM'S GUILT